



Two Poems by Hoshang Merchant

Poem 1

'We do not have a Homer singing the sea
And we do not even have a Walcott'(sd/-KNC)
--And I cannot be Homer
But I could've been Walcott for
I lived on the sea But
Our civilisation is riverine
And if we reach the we are One
that is to say None
that's philosophy not poetry
We have 1000s of miles of sea
But no poetry of the sea
Unless we count Chemmeen
And before it the port of poompuhar
We look inwards
The Greeks outwards
The Arabs too: outwards and onwards
And the Egyptian Cleopatra
between man and man
that is to say between sea and sea:
each of her men being an emperor
And she a woman, riverine

And I was Cleopatra
Dancing down the street
A butterfly balanced on my nose
Going to who knew what conquests?!
And the Arabs
taking the Malabar boys
Making them into men
And taking their women
Making them Moslem
And the Mappila was born
And the tree of the coconut
was Kalpavriksha
Fruit and seed
Thatch and root
Coir and rope
Kernel and boat
The men set out to sea
They had their songs
The women stayed home
They had their tears
Vasco da Gama came
And before him the Arab to Sind
And after him the English by sea



To Chennai and Chandannagore

Imagine the Christian
Sweating blood in the marshes
Imagine the convert
Sweating blood on the Cross!
There was no rain
There was no rice
Then there was Christ
And then there was grain
And the sea gave fish
And the land gave loaves
And god gave English
And we were all British
Seaman going to sea
Seaman going to war
Man-of-war going down
to the bottom of the sea
These were pearls which were
his eyes
bones became coral
bodies became water
And the world was an empire
On which the sun never set

The sea is deep
The sea is cruel
The sea is ebb and tide
The sea sings repetition
The sea joins lands
The sea divides lands
As sex joins and divides
Man and woman
The sea is contradiction
The sea is reconciliation
The sea is deep
The sea is cruel
What O sea do you bring us?
--I bring you pearls and coral and Death
Where O sea do you take us?
--I take you on a sea change
So the Malayalee speaks Arabic
And the Sinhalese speaks Malayalam
So rubber grows in Kerala
And tea sprouts in Irien Java
And everything is changed
Into something rich and strange
So yellow marries black
Imagine their babies



I found one fettered
to a sugar cane stalk in Hawaii
That was her history
She'd rechristened herself 'Ai', a poet
Sounds like a scream of pain?
You bet—the Christian God gives you grain
And Arab marries Somali
Imagine their babies
I found one tied
To his grandfather's magic carpet
On which he transported his Swahili slaves
Back to Oman
He flew Air Oman
And dreamt Swedish women
Of course he's called Mohammed
And by now he'd be dead of AIDS
But Islam saved him
Or alternating fasts
With fornication saved him
Saved for what?
Cleopatra was tied to a chariot
And ridden through Rome
That was her triumph
Christ was tied to a tree, Ixion to a wheel.

That was theirs
We were tied to the English tongue
We united our various sacred threads
Threw them into a well or a sea
(Everything sacred goes to water
Everything profane goes to earth)
The language we took to
Made us spring wings
We took to air
And Caliban curses no more
in his own tongue
But in an alien tongue now his own
O sea wash our sins away
O water purge us of our bestiality
O Ganges going to a sea
Drown us not but resurrect us
Into our own individuality
(Ah! The sin of sins!)
Is there ever a top dog
among dogs?
Caliban was a cannibal
He ate his own race
What do you name one
Who eats other races?



When I eat grain
He becomes my god
Then god becomes my blood
Then grain becomes my flesh
Nightly my lover
eats me in bed
Daily the sea
Grinds my bones to stone
My ancestors prayed to Ava—
Goddess of the sea
O Goddess protect us from perfidy
O Lady submerge not Bombay City
And my poor father
And his poorer grandfather
All prayed to the lady of the sea
And now stepmother steps in her mules
Into a family tradition
She isn't fitted for
For Mother Mary came out the sea
And before her Venus

And after them the Black Mary
Crossed the sea
Selling herself on board
Christ accepted her in the Holy Land
My mother dreamt Mary
When she lost her first baby
And Mary promised her many
When she tried to drown herself in the sea
We all drown at birth
Choked on our sails
We all hope to resurrect at marriage
But really we only resurrect at death
My lovers say I'm looking for a poem
My students say I'm looking for god
But I'm neither looking for lover nor poem nor god
But for Death which is all of these
Death is the sea
Rajiv went to Lanka
and dealt death
so they came here by sea
To kill him.
Rama went to Lanka
to seek Sita
The bear and the monkey helped
to set Sita free
And the squirrel's pebble for the bridge
earned her a stroke
--the stripes on her back
Rajavarman went to Kamboj

built Angkor
A Ship of Death
Be ready to die, the Buddha said
And the first heard him
And slaked its thirst
And the water in the pot
Cooled its heat
The parrot saw a forest fire
And brought the sea in his beak
And the sparrow was saved from the eagle
With the barter of Buddha's own body
For stories are also a sea
And all the stories sink
to the bottom of the sea
I was Caliban
Now I aspire
To be Prospero
I write in blood and semen
And I break my pen.

Poem 2

Why is the sea ebbing so far
Into itself? To crash better onto the land
Animals have inner hearing. Birds inner sight
Even reptiles sense all with their skin
Then why does the human mind set store by things
Not sense the sea of pain receding and churning
onto the shore of this world and the next?
A butterfly's wings in Chile set up a typhoon in China
I was Chuang Tzu: I slept and dreamt I was a worm
I woke up to become not poet, not worm
But a butterfly who set up a typhoon in China.



Hoshang merchant has written poetry since the age of 16, spanning some 60 years of writing.

He is the author of 20 books of poetry and five books of prose on gay theory as a basis for a new gay theory in India.

He taught post-colonial literatures and Shakespeare for 26 years before retiring in 2012.